



February 6, 2024

Re: temporary immigration measures in response to humanitarian crisis in Gaza

The Honourable Marc Miller, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship
365 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa ON K1A 0C8

Dear Minister,

The Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) welcomes significant announcements from the federal government to address the ongoing crisis in Gaza. CCR's focus is on Canada's obligations to uphold the rights of civilians, displaced persons and refugees as protected under international law. We commend Canada's call on December 12 for a sustainable ceasefire, and for increased and unimpeded access for humanitarian efforts in Gaza. This diplomacy must continue to help prevent further loss of life in a war that has killed over 25,000 Palestinians in four months including over 10,000 children.

CCR also welcomes that Canada has launched temporary immigration measures to provide a humanitarian pathway for Palestinians with family members in Canada seeking refuge, and to expedite permanent residence applications of Palestinians in Canada so they too can secure safety for relatives in Gaza as soon as possible.

In Canada and around the world, people expect and support leadership and compassion from our country towards those fleeing war and persecution. We led by example in our crisis responses to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Ukraine—hallmark initiatives that deepened Canadians' pride and confidence in who we are.

We write with concern however, because the details and roll out of the Temporary Resident Visa (TRV) for Gaza are deeply problematic and display an unacceptable inequity in Canada's responses to humanitarian emergencies. The discrepancies, (as with the measures announced recently for Sudan), reflect systemic racism in our immigration system and underscore the need for an effective, equitable and transparent policy framework to guide emergency immigration responses.

The following are key inequities and problems in the Gaza initiative that must be addressed.



1- Unprecedented and dangerous requirements for personal information

The Gaza visa application contains unique new requirements for Palestinians that are onerous and unreasonable, and which will cause delays that undermine the program's goal to bring family members to safety quickly. These additional requirements, entirely at the Canadian government's discretion, are in addition to traditional biometrics requests.

IRCC has provided no adequate justification for highly invasive questions seeking information on decades of employment history, social media accounts, and past email addresses— information that is exceedingly difficult to compile at the best of times let alone in conditions of unimaginable trauma. The requirement for disclosing and explaining scars and injuries is particularly egregious in a context where people in Gaza are subjected to continuous displacement, indiscriminate bombing, and the near total collapse of the healthcare system.

Canada is also providing no guarantees or offers of protection for how foreign governments may use the information, creating additional risks for Palestinians, in particular those who wish to exercise their right to return when conditions allow. These new patently racist information requirements should be eliminated and must not set a precedent for new layers of security processing.

2- Fees and Caps - A confusing process and more stark inequities

Canada must maintain consistency and equity in humanitarian responses. Applicants under the new Gaza program are required to pay a Temporary Resident Visa (TRV) processing fee of \$100 per person or \$500 per family, and a biometrics fee of \$85 per person or \$170 per family. This places an added burden on people who are trying to flee in the chaos of war. It is important to note that Canada provided visas under the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel initiative (CUAET) free of charge until July 15, 2023, and waived biometrics fees entirely. This is entirely consistent with an emergency crisis response for a temporary visa and should be replicated here.

There is also confusion over whether the Gaza program will be restricted to 1000 visas (as listed on the website), or flexible to accommodate more if the demand is there. With over 40,000 Palestinian Canadians desperate to see their families safe, the 1000 cap is grossly inadequate. Minister, if "there is no hard cap" as you have been quoted saying in the media, this should be reflected on the website for clarity, and to ease the stress on those filling out applications.

This would be consistent with Canada's decision not to impose caps on humanitarian arrivals from Ukraine, which resulted in Canada welcoming over 200,000 people under the CUAET from almost 1 million applications that were approved.



3- Greater support to families and more pathways needed

The goal to create a temporary pathway to safety for Palestinians from Gaza through accelerated family reunification is laudable. However, the financial requirement on families in Canada is high and other temporary pathways should be made accessible for Palestinians who do not have a qualifying family sponsor.

Under the current TRV, Palestinians only qualify if an anchor family member in Canada is willing to provide a sworn statement of financial and settlement support for one year. It is positive that those brought under this initiative will have access to three months of coverage under the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP), as well as settlement services and a fee-exempt work or study permit. But the program still puts the main financial and settlement burden on Canadian family members, in a context where one Canadian may be sponsoring several family members simultaneously. CCR has advocated that family and private sponsors should not bear the primary responsibility for emergency responses to global crises, as this is the obligation of governments.

We note again the inequity here, as the requirement for a family and financial sponsor were not present in the CUAET measures for those fleeing Ukraine, nor was family sponsorship the sole option for those Canada resettled from Afghanistan. Further, with exemplary leadership, the government of Canada provided a one-time non-taxable financial payment for adults and children arriving under CUAET, as well as set up an infrastructure with community partners to provide settlement supports for housing, education, employment and donations of goods and services. Palestinians deserve no less.

Financial assistance and coordination of settlement supports with other levels of government should be extended to Palestinians under this TRV as they settle and get work permits.

This should include IRCC working with provincial and municipal counterparts to ensure continuity in access to critical services, including health care and social assistance. For example, the federal government should stand ready to extend IFHP where needed to ensure those recovering from war and trauma do not fall through gaps in health care coverage, including for mental health and psychological supports.

4- Ensuring Gazans fleeing war are welcomed not feared

It is vital for the government to broadcast a warm Canadian welcome and rally public support for receiving Palestinians from Gaza at this difficult time. These efforts were hallmarks of past initiatives such as for those fleeing war in [Syria](#) or [Ukraine](#) and laid the foundations for settlement success including the new arrivals [feeling](#) that they were in fact welcome here.



In contrast, so much of the government's messaging has portrayed Palestinians as potential security risks and even terrorist threats to Canada, employing language that is harmful to Palestinian Canadians, promotes anti-Palestinian racism, and undermines public confidence in Canada's immigration system. Words matter. This is a humanitarian pathway for civilians fleeing war and should be promoted as such.

Minister, the toll of this war is high. The death count mounts daily, with thousands more children and families at risk of famine and disease. As Canada continues to work on getting humanitarian support for displaced civilian populations and towards a lasting ceasefire, let us show greater leadership in ensuring more dignified, accessible, and equitable pathways to safety for Palestinians facing catastrophic humanitarian conditions by addressing the key concerns noted above.

CCR also continues to urge consideration of means to accelerate processing for refugees in the region destined for resettlement in Canada who are affected by the widening shadow of violence, notably refugees in Lebanon and Israel. We recommend an expansion of the individuals processed under the Urgent Protection Program, with special consideration for vulnerable groups including unaccompanied minors and LGBTQIA+ populations.

Finally, we note that the shortcomings of Canada's temporary resident pathway for Palestinians highlight once again the need for the Canadian Government to adopt a comprehensive, anti-racist and transparent policy framework that can help ensure immigration measures in response to humanitarian emergencies are effective and equitable, no matter where in the world they occur. Building this framework requires substantive consultation with stakeholders.

The CCR is ready to help, and we would welcome a meeting to discuss these issues.

Sincerely,

Diana Gallego
President

Cc. Dr. Harpreet S. Kochhar, Deputy Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship